Urban Planning and the Pursuit of Happiness

EUROPEAN VARIATIONS ON A UNIVERSAL THEME (18th–21st CENTURIES)
Urban Planning and the Pursuit of Happiness

ARNOLD BARTETZKY / MARC SCHALENBERG (EDS.)
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF LOUISE BROMBY AND CHRISTIAN DIETZ

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As the previous articles in this volume have shown, the promise of happiness in relation to urban planning is not an especially new concept. Throughout the last centuries, almost all innovative concepts and visions of urban planning and urban development have implied the idea of a better future and the promise of an improvement in the quality of urban life. In this regard, gated communities do not differ from their predecessors. Furthermore, gated communities are not a particularly new idea in urban planning. Based on the reshaping of urban planning concepts from the beginning of the twentieth century, they promise a mixture of rural convenience and lively urbanity. The concept of gated housing is also no new phenomenon. In fact, one can find examples of gated and guarded housing throughout urban history since Roman times. Or, as the American regional planners Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder put it: “Gated and walled cities are as old as city-building itself.”

As a matter of fact, the novelty of gated communities is characterised by a network of dynamic parameters rather than by a single outstanding one. Certainly a major factor is that they reflect a concept of housing that goes far beyond the actual apartment or house in itself. Gated communities are promoted and presented as a post-modern lifestyle package. This kind of labelling and advertisement brings us to another level of analysis focussing on the actors, their strategic alignments and the rhetoric and imagery they use. In fact, the recent spread of this type of development is closely connected with a shift in urban governance reflecting a new relationship between public and private actors. The weakness of public institutions on the one hand and the strength of private developers on the other have had a severe impact on the proliferation of the housing product known as the ‘gated community.’

This essay will focus on the presentation of gated housing estates in Central and Eastern Europe: the rhetoric and images used by the sellers of these developments, their methods of argumentation and the ideas to which they appeal. The metaphor ‘paradise’ seems to be useful in describing the assumptions made concerning this type of planned community. Judging by their descriptions, gated housing estates are detached from the ordinary world and bathed in greenery; they offer a safe and harmonious way of life in the constantly changing and chaotic city. The essay uses the methods of critical discourse and media analysis, applied to a study of the housing environment. To a certain degree, this kind of approach allows the spheres of culture and economics to be investigated; discourse analysis within the context of urban research is used to highlight non-economical, cultural, or even non-rational aspects.

The Emergence of a New Kind of Housing and Lifestyle

For European cities, gated housing estates represent rather a new trend in housing. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where this idea was little known before 1989, there has been a massive increase in privately governed residential spaces in recent years, and these are beginning to noticeably shape and alter the cityscape with their walls, gates, and barriers. But...
gated communities are not only a new model of housing; they also imply a broader idea that can be labelled a spatial product or the expression of a new Zeitgeist. If we examine the offers made by the developers, it quickly becomes evident that gated communities are above all being marketed as a form of lifestyle (1). Robert Freestone defines housing estates of this type as a form of development organised as a comprehensive and detailed product. In the developers’ advertisements (as well as in individual offers), gated housing estates are described as enclosed and monitored, but also as beautiful, neat, and clean places. They possess a private and exclusive character, offering security and harmony and a sense of escape from the overcrowded metropolis. Two examples from Poland and Bulgaria serve to illustrate that the sale offers refer to something more than a flat:

The area covered with the project is over 70,000 square metres. Small but spacious streets, safe playgrounds, a courtyard, a tennis court, but most importantly the ample green vegetation will allow inhabitants to spend their free time here in a most agreeable way. We also did our best to make the dwellers feel safe in their development. Fenced area, a monitoring system as well as guards will prevent any disturbance of peace and quiet.6

The Residential Park Sofia offers convenient homes in harmony with nature and the highest standard of living. Abundant green areas and parks, bicycle paths and pedes-

Advertisements like this one raise a number of questions for urban researchers: who has access to these gated communities and what are the factors regulating access? Why have gated communities become so popular in such a short time and what do they offer? Does the housing estate set itself apart from neighbouring spaces and the entire city, and in what way? What types of discourse influence these processes? These questions are particularly important if we wish to gain an understanding of the transformations taking place in the public sphere and a conception of what post-modern social space is about; they are directly associated with issues of power and privilege as well as with negotiations relating to urban space and divisions between the public versus the private spheres.

This leads us on to consider recent dynamics and transformations in metropolitan areas that would not have been possible without the participation of domestic and international property developers.8 If we observe the real estate market since the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, it is noticeable that, in line with the rise in the share of developers in the market, the number of gated housing estates is also increasing. In 2006, 30 per cent of the newly-built housing market in Poland was already in the hands of companies, mainly in major cities. These companies are becoming important new players on the market, most often controlling the entire investment process, from the design of the real estate to the sale. In contrast to communal housing or individual housing construction, the new market players offer a much more complex product that goes beyond the mere concept of housing; a special lifestyle is also suggested to potential inhabitants. The developers apply strategies that appeal to fundamental needs. The most important features are security and nature, which are highlighted in order to “produce” a new kind of place evoking a vision of “paradise.” This is presented as a synthesis of two worlds: the best of urbanity combined with the advantages of the countryside, resulting in a blend of safety, peace and health that proclaims urban happiness. This can be described as an “opposition of mythical nostalgias.”9 These oppositions seem to be amalgamated in the harmonious whole, guaranteeing a new life in a new world. The attempt to connect the two elements seems unlikely to succeed, although undoubtedly it is a worthwhile pursuit as far as investment is concerned, just as the Walt Disney Corporation invested in the creation of a perfect Celebrity Town (2, 3).

As Safe as Paradise—or the Game of the Fear of Crime

Crime prevention and the changeability of crime cannot be understood without considering changes in social and cultural sensitivity. Looking at various fields of society, we can even speak of a new “culture of fear.” As the criminologist David Garland pointed out,
crime has gained a new dimension: that of fear. Whilst at one time it had more of a local and situational character, afflicting specific individuals or neighbourhoods, fear suddenly grew to become one of one of the most important social problems, not to say the trademark of an entire contemporary culture. There are diverse causes for the current popularity of fear and security in media and politics as well as in urban planning. Nevertheless, the upswing has rather an elementary, ideological core that can be explored by looking at the very base of fear and security. First of all, both are socially produced values created by the distinction between norm and deviance. Furthermore, security is something that is of essential benefit for every human being: nobody explicitly supports crime or danger. Therefore, security and crime prevention are important ideals for everyone, possessing universal importance. On the other hand, this makes them delicate values, which can be readily referred to by many actors for different purposes. For example, the fear of crime can be reinforced by public discourse on the subject of crime (i.e., crime talk), subsequently becoming part of a ‘game with the fear of crime.’ Against this backdrop we interpret the proliferation of gated com-

2 Traffic sign indicating a gated community in Sofia.
3 Faked landscape or paradise? Inside an American-style gated community in the suburbs of Sofia.
4 Security measures at a gated housing estate in Sofia. Nobody really knows what the gates, walls and cameras are actually supposed to protect the inhabitants against.
munities as a securitisation of housing. And indeed, fear and security materialise clearly in the form of the gated community, in which characteristic elements of the “culture of fear” are inscribed (→ 4).

The need to provide security has not always been a big issue in Central and Eastern European societies. But nowadays the fear of crime is regarded as completely natural and rational, even though findings show that Bulgarians or Poles actually feel rather secure in their places of residence. Consequently, gated communities are becoming popular and even an accepted aspect of public discourse. In this regard the fear of crime, manifest amongst representatives of the richer strata, has caused security to emerge as an important component of marketing strategies. An entire branch of industry has developed, providing security services to private persons and communities on a level that state institutions are not able to provide. A striking example of this is the fact that there are 25,000 bodyguards at work in Warsaw. This is two and half times more than the number of policemen in the city.12 They guard not only offices and shops, but also housing estates. Similar figures and trends are found in Sofia, where almost every apartment has a sticker at the entrance saying that it is regularly controlled by a security company.13

The above-mentioned aspects nevertheless indicate a new dimension in the marketing strategies of developers. A significant example of the close connection between the privatisation of security and the increased popularity of gated communities was the Open Conference on “Life Safety” organised in Wrocław in 2005 by one of the developers of gated communities. The conference was used to promote the new housing estate Archipelago of Green, which, according to the organisers, was Wrocław’s first housing estate to be built in co-operation with a security agency. The programme of the conference stated explicitly that “the privatisation of security services” was the best solution for crime reduction at both local and national levels. This model of security, well-known from shopping malls, was successfully transferred to housing estates in only a couple of years. The motif of safety is subject to distinct privatisation: notions of security and fear constitute the basic, though not the only, advertising lever. Even the contents of brief newspaper articles bring over the message clearly:

Investors take care to use the slogan ‘guarded housing estate’ in the offers they make. … It is a good sales trick. People are attracted by the notion of protection it infers—said Beata Święch, the Assistant Chairman of the Isan Invest SA Company.14

Real estate developers were one of the first to notice that a cultural change had taken place, using safety as a leitmotif in their marketing strategies. The concept of safety control gained primary significance, alongside the status and the “beauty” of buildings. The concept of safety became so important that advertisements and articles began to define housing estates not as fenced off or guarded, but as “safe housing estates”:

The location induced us to design this safe housing estate. … There will be only two entries and one driveway here. … There are entry-phones by every gate. Moreover, cameras can be installed in the garage and the images from these places can be observed on several TV channels.15

Having summarised the fashion of security services and the societal output these infer, it is interesting to take a short look at the residents’ perception of security. We have already mentioned the results of various studies showing that the majority of Bulgarians and Poles do not feel particularly insecure in their apartments and cities. And, indeed, a comparison of crime reports and statistics clearly shows that Sofia, Warsaw, or other Central and East European cities are no different from Amsterdam, Brussels, or Berlin in terms of crime levels.16 When asked about safety in the city, respondents from Sofia stated that it was not actual physical danger that caused them to favour gated housing estates. Rather, a kind of desire for control seems to be the main motif inciting people to move into gated communities, a wish to escape from the uncontrolled (chaotic) post-socialist urban daily routine.17 Furthermore, it can be concluded that the quest for privacy and social distinction seems to outplay the issue of security in Central and Eastern European cities.18

The Heavenly Landscape

The case of gated housing estates is not only challenging in terms of accessibility or inaccessibility. What seems to be a key element in understanding the phenomenon of such estates is, above all, the category of the landscape. Landscaping is more than a form of designing surroundings or of arranging space and places: it is a way of arranging and projecting social and cultural values. In critical geography, a landscape is not only a morphological entity (relating to its form), but also a representative of social and cultural meanings involving social relations. To use Henri Lefebvre’s terminology, it is both a means and a result of production and reproduction processes.19 Under the conditions of a consumer society, which inextricably links identity with possession, affiliation and access to a particular landscape constitutes one of the most serious indicators of identity, especially with regards to social class. Furthermore, landscape is a special set of goods. It is assigned to concrete spaces, it is geographically ordered and remains in place unlike other goods which circulate more freely.20 One of the inhabitants of a gated community frankly confessed:

So I decided independently and spontaneously … a panoramic view was definitely crucial … The panorama accounts for more or less 50 per cent of the value of this apartment.21

If we analyse information delivered by developers in all kinds of promotional materials, press releases and interviews, it is immediately evident that the evocations of landscape are...
of considerable significance. The market-driven characteristics presented to potential buyers reveal that paradoxes and contradictions are consciously used and integrated in marketing strategies. Gated communities attempt to combine nature and culture: the gated housing estate offers untouched nature and at the same time provides fully subordinated, developed space.

Orchid Hills is a residential project that offers a modern solution, a living environment combining comfort with functionality. The gated character of the compound, the terrace-levelled park and the exquisite view of the Vitosha mountain give the residents the feeling of security, comfort and a high standard of living. [Orchid Hills] allows its inhabitants to live close to nature, yet still provides the comfort and ease of city life.

Marina Mokotów is situated in the centre of Warsaw, although over the half of its area is a landscaped parkland of sheltered nooks and small charming lakes.

The importance of nature is especially obvious in the descriptions of gated housing estates provided not by the developers themselves, but by groups of designers or architects anxious to stress the advantages of new investment sites as far as the surroundings and their natural beauty are concerned, rather than concentrating on elements such as fences or gates. This change is clearly visible over a period of time: initially great emphasis was placed on their closed-in character, whereas subsequently developers changed the type of argumentation and focused more on their aesthetic and natural advantages. A conversation with the designer of the Eko Park housing estate in Cracow is an interesting example of this kind of rhetoric based on the discourse of nature:

Until now it was enough to plant grass on the roof in order to talk about the ecological character of the construction … In our understanding, thinking about ecology means limiting the amount of pollutants which are being more and more frequently used during the technological processes involved in the production of construction materials. This does not stop us from designing and providing the best quality of flats; at the same time we make sure that all garages are built underground in order to keep motorised traffic separate from pedestrian walkways and to provide more green spaces. Of course, the housing estate will be enclosed and appropriately guarded.

On the one side, the designer expresses a vision of the housing estate based on principles of sustainable development, combining high quality with a concern for the ecological dimension of the construction process and the safeguarding of nature. On the other side, at the end of his statement the designer states that the housing estate will “of course” be fenced in. This statement reflects the belief that a sustainable development and a harmonious relationship with the environment do not in any way exclude the putting up of fences and the creation of social inequality.

The landscape as an icon is, last but not least, a form of ideology: not only an appearance of space, but also a way of looking at and composing the world. In the case of gated communities, the landscape simultaneously works as an exclusion and as an inclusion factor, since it is appropriated and controlled by one group, and made unavailable to others. In this way the landscape at stake becomes a spatial manifestation of social relations—an ideology condensed to such a level that it manifests itself in a specific physical form. Constructing the landscape refers almost exclusively to the area occupied by the housing estate, rarely going beyond the actual and symbolic border of the wall or the fence, which separates the investment from the rest of the city. In determining idiosyncrasies of physical space, both access to and usage of “the world of nature” plays a significant role. Access to nature is firmly controlled by the fence, and the so-called “natural environment” is always professionally improved and maintained by gardeners. Just as in the early conceptions of environmentalists, the space of refuge becomes a kind of sanctuary offering “contemplation.” It is often shaped in a way which utilises the ‘natural firewall’ (walls of green, artificial lakes, etc.). This romantic evocation of early environmentalists, adapted by the designers of gated communities, gives rise to many fundamental questions concerning public goods and social justice, such as the right of access to shrinking natural resources and different forms of landscape.

These questions do not only concern the access to newly-created green spaces, but (above all) the use of already existing public spheres for newly-built private investments. Gated communities tend to ‘play the nature card’ in an aggressive way by using public resources (e.g., urban parks). A journalist reports:

A cosy housing estate at the Szczęśliwicki Park … named Lake Green owes its name to a small pond located on an adjacent plot which inhabitants can see from behind the fence. Szczęśliwice is a large construction site—the noise of machines and the roar of lorries are disrupting the pastoral life of its inhabitants.

This leads us to another characteristic of the heavenly landscape promised by gated communities: the notion of history. In order to fully satisfy the high expectations of potential inhabitants, developers are beginning to take the history of the territory into consideration. History is becoming the next element in the package; it is produced or reproduced for the purposes of making business transactions. Cultural and historical references allow a sense of belonging to arise. Developers use images embedded in the historical or master narrative of a city in order to underline the exclusiveness and prestige of their gated communities. A striking example of this is the fact that 90 per cent of the gated housing estates in Sofia are situated in the traditionally wealthy neighbourhoods that formerly housed the king’s family and the socialist nomenclature. Furthermore, developers try to convince potential buyers
that particular places, even if they are brand-new on the geographical and social map, are already steeped in “history”:

The name is intended to give the residence [Residence under the Eagle—the authors] importance and splendour. It refers to the monument crowned with the Polish Eagle dating back to the Duchy of Warsaw, which stood in this place in the nineteenth century. For years it fell into disrepair; now it has been restored and placed on a new base in front of the main door of the residence.29

It is almost impossible to localise the founding myth, but certainly there are numerous strategies of shaping or redefining the identity of a place that are used to fulfil the promise of happiness to buyers, providing them with a sense of belonging. The suggestive power of the place not only consists of restricting availability, but also of expressing or constructing a sense of collective memory. To a large extent, a romanticised approach is employed here; great emphasis is placed on the past of the area, such in the case of Marina Mokotów which is presented as a “new town on Old Mokotów.” These gated housing estates limit the access to a space by means of visible physical barriers and at the same time they create or process the history of this specific confined space. Developers use romantic names, mostly associated with nature and historical events: green hills, wild streams. In more advanced scripts, stories of other city sites are created or referred to:

The new housing estate makes reference to many traditions. On the one hand we pay tribute to Ebenezer Howard and his garden city. Here we have an exceptional example of the realisation of this dream in the district of Giszowiec in Katowice. On the other hand we refer to exclusive residential developments from the inter-war period. (Designer T. Konior)30

This quotation reveals another feature of gated communities. It is quite evident that developers use and combine different styles of architecture and urban planning in order to attract as many potential buyers as possible. The majority of gated communities are designed according to an eclectic concept combining the idea of the garden city with the concept of standardised suburban detached or semi-detached housing. Additionally, developers employ specific features that relate to the local context, for example specific roof constructions. All in all, these architectural concepts are directed at promoting a particular sense of well-being and a feeling of security.

An important aspect of the whole package is the “myth of community” that somehow all gated communities are associated with. But in contrast to their North American or Latin American counterparts, Central and Eastern European gated community developers do not accentuate the meaning of a community with strong social relations between its members. Instead of promoting the idea of a homogenous community, developers focus on terms such as cosiness and neighbourly relations. In some way these strategies can be interpreted as being an adaptation to Eastern European circumstances, where the majority of potential buyers are not searching for a community, but rather for social distinction, privacy and the provision of services.
I don’t have anything in common with my neighbours. You have to know that it is really difficult for us ‘ordinary older Bulgarians’ to feel comfortable here, because we are so different from all these young and rich people. We were raised differently with different values. This creates huge social differences in terms of attitudes towards life. … So we have moved here because of the landscape, fresh air and peace.31

The “beauty” of gated housing estates is one of the most important components distinguishing them from the chaotic post-socialist urban surroundings (Ł 5). Analysing the space of metropolitan areas in Eastern Europe, the luxurious and prestigious character of gated communities is mainly due to the provision of “exclusive” access to an aesthetically composed space. It is worthwhile taking note of the background against which gated developments are emerging. The current fragmentation of post-socialist cities is being intensified still further by chaotic and uncontrolled building developments, a lack of spatial regulations and gaps in the infrastructure. This stems from a loss of general public order, resulting in the financial incapacity and weakness of public institutions. Therefore, the gated communities are arising as a reaction to the poor quality of housing in Eastern European cities, where the randomness of architectural solutions has become the rule. In this context, the title of a conference which took place in May 2006 seems remarkable: “Warsaw—the Capital of the ‘Third World.’” The provocative images presented during the event showed gated housing estates, chaotic development, a stark contrast between poverty and wealth. It is worthwhile regarding gated communities not only as one of the causes of such a city image, but also as an effect of spatial disorder. Within the context of ubiquitous chaos, the orderly and planned nature of the enclosed territory often becomes valuable in itself.

Such spectacular construction sites as Marina Mokotów or Residential Park Sofia, both officially known as “the city within the city,” demonstrate a harmoniously constructed urban landscape which plays an important role in providing a sense of security for contemporary urban dwellers. Local examples of master-planned communities that have been realised are generally rather modest. However, within the context of the surrounding architectonic and urban chaos of post-socialist cities, they certainly deserve the description of “master-planned.”

The presence of developers and planned investments on the Polish and Bulgarian markets is relatively new. After a period of initial distrust, an increasing number of buyers are deciding to place their trust in developers and purchase a flat or a house in a gated housing estate. Thus within a relatively short period of time (between the early nineteen-nineties and now) cities have adapted, more or less consciously, to a course of urban planning which has been functioning in the USA for several decades. The detailed planning of gated housing estates enables the estate’s whole territory to be kept under control. Estates which are criticised as “islands of luxury” or “marble cages” by the press indeed constitute modern and aesthetic points on the map of the post-socialist cities. The spatial reality of many Central and Eastern European cities is quite accurately described by Rowland Atkinson and John Flintlock’s concept of “time-space trajectories of segregation,” in which segregation refers not only to gated housing estates, but a general “splintering urbanism” with its territories, corridors and objectives.32

The feeling of aesthetic cohesion serves to sanction and rationalise the practice of spatial and social segregation which, otherwise, could be the subject of much criticism. As mentioned above, security must be understood in a much broader sense than merely in the category of fear: security here is provided in a wider ontological sense. The aesthetic landscape, then, could be perceived as a way of implementing private politics of control, independent from local or national “zero tolerance” programmes, although they are based on the same assumptions. In this perspective, it is most useful to describe the reality of gated housing estates in terms of the theme park metaphor.33 Gated housing estates, especially those of a higher standard, create a distinctive atmosphere by using unusual architectural solutions and high-quality materials. When one first enters a fenced and guarded building complex, one experiences a mixture of emotions, including uncertainty and excitement. Thus the analogies to a hotel lobby, used by many of the visitors and journalists to describe their emotions on first entering a gated community, are understandable. Gated housing estates create an “affective ambience,” characteristic of a space of consumption.34 Aesthetics play the key role here. In the chaos of the city, “islands of luxury” are becoming heterotopias and “forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well arranged as ours is disordered,”35 much like the case of the former Jesuit colonies described by Michel Foucault.

The Trouble with Happiness

The rhetoric of prestige and exclusivity is used by developers almost as often as the rhetoric of beauty and nature. Admittedly, not all newly-built gated housing estates have an elitist character; the standardisation of these developments in Central and Eastern Europe has at the same time led to a diversification of gated housing products. Nowadays they vary in size and concept, and some of them are aimed at fulfilling the needs of humbler middle-class strata, with a limited amount of floor space and rooms. Still the language of prestige and exclusiveness remains:

Welcome to the new residential project ‘sofia sky’ … [Your] home in Bulgaria—a unique blend of Austrian quality and Bulgarian nature. In the district of Simeonovo on the slopes of the Vitosha Mountain, an international lifestyle is being offered in this matchless location.36

The Deep Blue housing estate will be guarded and monitored (the monthly cost of this service is sixty złoty per flat). Investors are pleased to announce the construction of the recreational centre with a swimming pool, fitness club, golf course, tennis courts and
horse riding club. This will be carried out within two years. The kindergarten will also soon be open.\footnote{37}

The enclosed area, the system of monitoring and guards will not get in the way of the peace and the modern technology … will provide the joy and satisfaction of being on holiday all year round.\footnote{38}

A house is presented here not only as a place to live, but also as a kind of feeling of “being on holiday.” The comfort is derived from a set of activities that are included in the price of the flat. Gated housing estates—in Eastern Europe as elsewhere—provide leisure activities such as fitness rooms, tennis courts, swimming pools (for adults), beautiful playgrounds (for children), and man-made lakes (\footnote{6}). This vision of happiness as described in the advertisements for gated communities often clashes with “reality.” Real life does not appear to be as simple and peaceful as it is made out to be. To demonstrate some problems arising from this vision of paradise and happiness, it is worth taking a look at an example from popular culture. Because of the rising popularity of gated communities in Poland, Polish National TV, Channel 2 introduced a new TV show called The Bullionaires (Bilionerzy) in 2004. This TV show followed the changes in the lifestyle of the Nowik family, who moved from a pre-fabricated large scale housing estate to a gated community after winning a lottery organised by an instant bullion producer. The producer’s short description of the show plot explains (that):

Everything changes when they take part in a bullion cubes contest and win a luxury furnished apartment in an exclusive tower block in the centre of Warsaw, with the rent paid for an entire lifetime. All their dreams have come true. However, it soon turns out that living amongst the elite isn’t at all simple.\footnote{39}

Differences between the “ordinary family” and the “elite” soon become clearly visible in the new environment. Moving to a new place of residence is tantamount to a change in the family’s entire lifestyle—the protagonists develop new customs, change their mode of speaking, and go on a diet. The humour of this TV show relies on the relations between the “ordinary family” and the “elite,” whose representatives are the members of a “new middle class”: television producers and a journalist, a businesswoman, public relations agency owners, and a gay couple. The problem with happiness as revealed by the TV show seems to be crucial for understanding the expectations and reality of life in gated communities. From the inhabitants’ perspective, the image of gated communities and homeowners associations does not so much correspond with North American examples, as presented by Evan McKenzie, as with the reality of the American Wild West.\footnote{40} Moreover, the metaphor of the “Wild West” arose completely independently in several interviews. Inhabitants used terms such as “ranchers” or “sheriff” to illustrate the behaviour of inhabitants and their way of managing the associations:

There is [in our Board—the authors] a chairman who, at some point, felt he was a sheriff; the guy started bothering everybody … He became the boss of the Board and then suddenly started to behave like a sheriff. After that he resigned voluntarily, but even then he thought he was the sheriff here. He would sit at the porter’s lodge all the time, giving instructions to the doorkeepers, telling them what to do. A new chairman was appointed, but even now he is still interfering. We tried to elect a new management board, but no one was interested.\footnote{41}

Conflict seems to be a major part of life in an “idyllic” gated community. It takes on diverse forms, involving both relations with the next-door neighbours and relations with people from “behind the fence.” The framework of conflicts includes a considerable number of
potential actors. Even when we look at the inhabitants only, it is possible to pinpoint a few characteristics of the conflicts. First of all, the relationships between owners as opposed to tenants of the flats in a gated housing estate are potential sources of conflict. Owners are strongly “ascribed to their role”: because they actually own the place, they are more prone to conform to the rules of the associations; they are also more demanding, expressing their expectations to other inhabitants, to the estate’s administration or to security officers. Their expectations grow in proportion to the amount of funds they have invested in the apartment. Furthermore, this leads to a juridification of relations between neighbours, arising from a strong sense of ownership. Tenants display a much freer attitude to settling and cohabiting in the gated housing estate: they are more often the organisers of social gatherings and they are less willing to conform to regulations. This applies particularly to students and foreigners. The breaking of principles is often encountered with harsh reactions, such as for example the chairman of one of the gated housing estates in Warsaw imposing limits on the number of access cards given out:

It turns out that we live in a penal camp, everyone is being punished because of those who rent flats out to students, who aren’t registered as inhabitants—Mr Piotr is anxious—can the co-operative restrict access to my own flat?

The second source of conflict is based on the relationship between childless inhabitants and families with children. The housing offers a guarantee of security and “peace,” but the notion of “peace” strongly depends on the family situation of inhabitants. Families with children are looking for a suitable place to bring up their offspring: in most cases the gated housing estate offers them at least a small playground, greenery and a sense of security. However childless inhabitants, mainly the retired, are seeking peace in terms of silence and comfort. The diversity of lifestyles and the organisation of the settlement, as an effect of the second demographic transition, combined with the vague offers made by developers with the aim of satisfying the needs of all potential categories of purchasers, create another area of conflicts:

The playground was built here, next to the porter’s lodge in the corner. If the mother allows her child to go outside, it may go to the pond where she can’t see it … That’s why the mothers asked for a small sandpit to be put right next to the house, but an elderly gentleman [at the Board meeting—the authors] gets up and says that he has looked into the project and he chose to live in a part of the building where there wouldn’t be any bloody kids.

A further source of trouble and conflicts is a lack of communication between property management and residents. In spite of being advertised as luxury housing products, several gated communities have several shortcomings that can be traced back to a lack of housing quality and to a misunderstanding of the rules, regulations and covenants.

In the beginning … we did not make clear contracts with the residents concerning the management. We were probably not ready for such things. That was in 2001. In 2002 they got the keys to their apartments. We didn’t make contracts explicitly stating that the management of the complex had to be paid for. … Later on we tried to introduce this, but of course residents asked us “why are you asking us to pay if the others don’t have to pay?” And so from 2001 until the beginning of 2007 we were maintaining the gardens for free. But this year we said either you pay 300 euros per year per apartment—which is not that high an amount—or we stop maintaining. So they had to decide.

When we decided to move here the developers told us that this would be a small gated housing complex with three or four apartment houses. But the developers kept changing their plans all the time. Instead of three or four apartment blocks, this area already has nineteen now … So we have been living on a never-ending construction site for the last four years.

Another area of conflict, which is different to the situation on open housing estates as far as solving neighbourhood quarrels is concerned, arises from the continual presence of intermediaries. Internal conflicts in gated housing estates are mainly solved with the help of the security officers. One could gain the impression that the purpose of employing a security company is not so much to protect the inhabitants against danger from the outside world, but rather to supervise predictable internal affairs and regulate intra-community behaviour.

Conclusion
Gated housing estates as a product can be regarded as a sociocultural phenomenon that goes hand in hand with discontinuities in postmodern urban life. In the case of Central and Eastern Europe, gated housing estates are closely connected with societal uncertainty, the commoditisation of housing and a general privatisation of urban space. As described above, developers are using these discontinuities, along with a broad repertoire of cultural references, to promote their products. Furthermore, the gated housing estate can be seen as a milieu which plays a significant and specific role in redefining the social structure of a whole region. Gated housing estates are a modernised milieu, “perhaps even more effective in creating differences between social classes” than other outward displays of income or education. That is why it is worth analysing this particular urban and architectonic form on a local, regional and global level, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.
Endnotes

1 For the sake of readability we will use both the emblematic term ‘gated community’ (which has become an umbrella term or even a trademark in urban studies when talking about security-oriented, privately governed urban neighbourhoods) and ‘gated housing estates’ (which is less euphemistic and probably more appropriate for Central and Eastern European) interchangeably. Renald Le Goix and Chris J. Wimbush, “Gated Communities,” Geography Compass 3 (2008-3): 1189-1214.


3 This article is based on field studies conducted by the authors in Bulgaria and Poland. Although there are differences between gated housing in Bulgaria and Poland, the similarities clearly prevail. Differences occur mainly in the public perception of gated housing estates (in terms of the range of public discussions); the marketing strategies and promising of happiness are almost identical (as they are in many other Central and Eastern European cities). Therefore, this essay focuses on the similarities between gated housing estates.


8 In Bulgaria and Poland the proliferation of gated housing estates since the end of the nineteen-nineties is closely connected with the market-entry of international real estate developers, the establishment of local real estate companies and the consolidation of local housing markets.


12 According to data provided by the “Solidarność” trade union, there were 250,000 security officers employed in Poland in 2007, 25,000 of whom were working in Warsaw, see: http://solidarnosc.org (accessed March 4, 2009).


18 In this respect and in the motives of their residents, gated housing estates in Central and Eastern Europe seem to differ from the ones in Latin America and the USA. As several studies have emphasised, fear and the risks of urban life play a much more crucial role for residents in Latin America and the USA moving to closed neighbourhoods. Setha Low, “The edge and the center: gated communities and the discourse of urban fear,” American Anthropologist 103 (2001): 45–58. Setha Low, Behind the gate: life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America (New York: Routledge, 2003); Teresa Caldeira, City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo (Berkeley/Ca: University of California Press, 2000).


20 David Harvey, The Limits to Capital (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 233.

21 Author’s interview with a resident of a gated housing estate in Toruń, Poland.

22 Orta paradoksler such as “uniqueness vs. standardisation” or “community vs. individuality” can also be found. Concerning the paradox “uniqueness vs. standardisation” it can be said that although they are sold as unique neighbourhoods, gated communities are based on a concept of standardisation, see: Jacek Gądecki, “New social milieus—gated communities in the Polish urban landscape,” in Gated and Guarded Housing in Eastern Europe, Forum 11, ed. Christian Smigiel, 2009. Therefore one can find dozens of similar gated housing estates all across Eastern Europe. The paradox “community vs. individualism” relates to the concept of a homogenous community or neighbourhood that the developers are trying to sell. On the other hand, the same developers underline the individuality of each accommodation unit, designed to meet the requirements of each individual resident.


25 Adam Zyzman, “Nastąpić dialog z otoczeniem. Rozmowa z architektami Markiem Dunikowskim, współautorem planu posiedła mieszkaniowego Eko Park [Establishing a Dialogue with the Surroundings. An interview with Marek Dunikowski, the architect and co-author of the Eko Park Housing Estate project.],” Gazeta Wyborcza (Gazeta Krakowska), May 21, 2004.


28 History has certainly become an important tool for promoting all kinds of housing or commercial products. Nevertheless, it seems that gated communities are even more strongly associated with the past by means of an eclectic idealisation of urban life.

29 Malwina Bursko and Dariusz Bartoszewicz, (see note 27).

30 Author’s interview with the designer T. Konior.

31 Author’s interview with a resident of a gated and guarded housing estate in Sofia.


37 Information leaflet advertising a gated housing estate in Toruń (MT 2002).


41 Author’s interview with a resident of a gated and guarded housing estate in Toruń, Poland.


43 Jerry S. Maytzwke and Tomasz Urynkowski. “Kto im otworzy drzwi? [Who is going to open the doors to them?],” Gazeta Wyborcza (Gazeta Stołeczna), December 23, 2006.

44 Author’s interview with a resident of a gated housing estate in Toruń.

45 Author’s interview with the developer of MC—a gated housing estate in Sofia.

46 Author’s interview with a resident of MC—a gated housing estate in Sofia.